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Impact and Implications of Chemical Weapons Use in the Iran-Iraq War

Interagency Intelligence Memorandum

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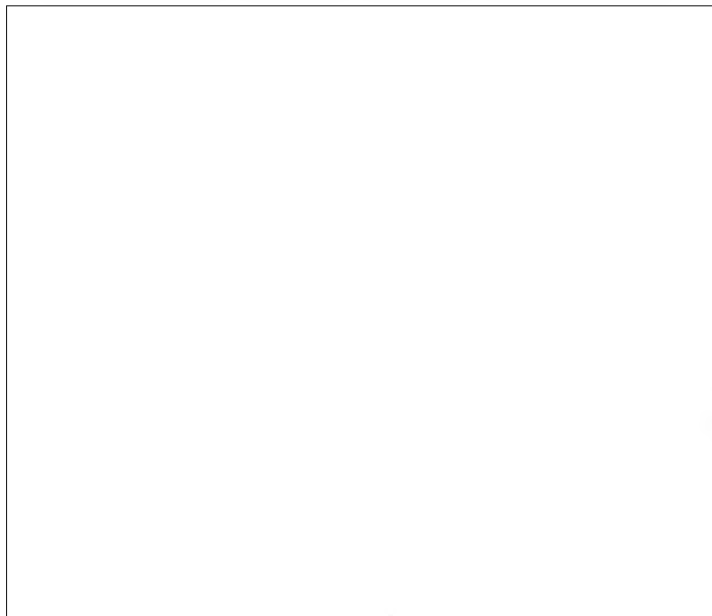
IMPACT AND IMPLICATIONS OF
CHEMICAL WEAPONS USE IN THE
IRAN-IRAQ WAR

Information available as of 20 March 1988 was used in the preparation of this Memorandum, which was approved for publication on 22 March 1988 by the Acting Chairman of the National Intelligence Council.

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Iraqi Use of Chemical Weapons Against the Kurds

Iraqi use of chemical weapons to subdue the Kurdish population inside Iraq, along the triborder area with Iran and Turkey, is qualitatively different from the use of chemicals against another country. The Iraqis have primarily used riot control agents and possibly, in some cases, chemical weapons against the Kurds to minimize the diversion of troops from more critical fronts and the losses that might occur in inaccessible areas that favor guerrilla forces. It is very difficult to determine the type of agents and the exact circumstances under which any of the agents may have been used.

Iraq used the riot control agent CS against the Kurds during the civil war of 1974-75.

groups. To minimize losses of men and materiel, Iraqi troops have used riot control agents and possibly chemical weapons repeatedly when conventional weapons have not sufficed to subdue villagers before razing their dwellings.

Saddam Husayn reportedly gave the direction of this campaign to Ali Hassan al-Majid, director of internal security and Saddam's cousin, who devised a "scorched earth" policy to eliminate dissident Kurdish activity in northern Iraq. The policy, carried out between April and July 1987, and apparently resumed in October 1987, has spurred the desertion of many loyalist Kurds and private criticism from senior Iraqi Government and military figures. Even the figurehead vice president of Iraq, a Kurd, has refused to support the policy—a daring defiance of Saddam Husayn's authority.

The types and lethality of chemical weapons available to both sides have increased in recent months, and the fighting in northeastern Iraq demonstrates that neither has backed off from employing them even against Kurdish population centers.

We do not believe the prospect of further civilian casualties would dissuade either side from using chemical weapons.

The campaign against the Kurds once again intensified in early 1987 as Iraq attempted to secure the northern border areas with Turkey and Iran. Since April 1987, a military campaign has been waged to eradicate village bases of support for Kurdish guerrilla

8. Until 1986, release authority for chemical weapons in Iraq was held at the highest levels of decision-making, perhaps exclusively by President Husayn. This was probably to ensure control of a limited stockpile of chemical munitions and to guarantee that sufficient supplies would be available to counter large Iranian offensives. Baghdad may also have believed that tight control of chemical weapons would make it easier to deny that Iraqi forces had employed CW. In 1986, CW release authority was delegated to corps-level commanders as the result of Iraqi losses during the Al Faw and Mehran campaigns and after the military apparently convinced President Husayn to change release authority for chemical weapons to permit better integration of CW into battle plans. Chemical weapons now appear to be an important adjunct for the achievement of tactical objectives.

9. In our judgment, the Iraqis perceive chemical weapons to be an effective complement to their conventional arsenal. Overall, we believe the frequency of chemical weapons use—probably constrained

only by availability—has increased, and the effectiveness of Baghdad's CW employment in major battles is improving.

10. *Constraints on Iraqi Use.* By denying its use of CW, Iraq has shown some concern for international consequences. Baghdad's main concern has been that any public outcry would further complicate its efforts to obtain necessary conventional war materials as well as necessary CW materials. Although limited international reaction has thus far not deterred Iraq's chemical employment, no political or religious constraints seem to bear seriously on Husayn's decision to employ CW. International and regional pressure—United Nations condemnatory resolutions, demarches, and export controls—have been ineffective in stopping the development of the CW program or continued battlefield use.

Iran

11. We believe that, as Iran's chemical weapons stockpile increases and Iraqi chemical attacks continue, Tehran will selectively increase its use of chemicals

Table 2
Selected Chemical Weapon Employments

Date	Area Deployed	Type	Approximate Casualties
Iraqi Use			
July 1982	Mandali and Basrah	CS type	Few
August 1983	Haji Umran and Mt Kordeman	Mustard	Less than 100
October-November 1983	Panjwin	Mustard	3,000
February-March 1984	Majnoon Island	Mustard	2,500
March 1984	Al Basrah	Tabun	50 to 100
March 1985	Hawizah Marsh	Mustard/tabun	3,000
February 1986	Al Faw	Mustard/tabun	8,000 to 10,000
December 1986	Umm ar Rasas	Mustard	thousands
April 1987	Al Basrah	Mustard/tabun	5,000
October 1987	Sumar/Mehran	Mustard/nerve agent	3,000
March 1988	Halabjah	Mustard/nerve agent	hundreds
Iranian Use			
April 1987	Al Basrah	Phosgene/CK	50
October 1987	Sumar/Mehran	Mustard (possible)	hundreds
March 1988	Halabjah	Cyanogen chloride	hundreds

in retaliation, and possibly as a preemptive weapon. In April 1987, Iran clearly crossed the chemical barrier, using chemical agents in a militarily significant but limited quantity in the Al Basrah area.

This apparent change in policy seems confirmed by a mid-October 1987 Iranian mustard attack in retaliation for an Iraqi chemical attack.

12. Constraints on Iranian Use. Due to Iraq's much greater chemical capability, we assess that Iran will remain cautious and selective in its use of chemicals. We are confident, however, that the Iranians will continue to use and probably increase their employment of chemical weapons to meet military requirements or to retaliate for Iraqi chemical attacks.

Battlefield Effectiveness of Chemical Weapons

13. Faced with superior numbers of Iranian soldiers in a war of attrition, Iraq elected in 1982 to use the riot control agent CS in conjunction with conventional weapons, hoping to solve its military dilemma. Iraq's early uses of mustard and tabun in 1983 and 1984

were probably militarily ineffective because of poor employment techniques and unsuitable weather conditions. In some cases, Iraqi pilots released chemical munitions from too high altitudes and rarely delivered enough agent at one time to be militarily effective. In other cases, chemical bombs were released too low for their fuzes to function. Iran thus obtained numerous Iraqi chemical weapons intact and scored a major propaganda victory by publicizing this evidence (see figure 2). Also, Iraq used chemical weapons in damp conditions—particularly in the southern border area—when the wind was blowing toward its own troops and in daylight. In 1983, for example, Iraq used fighter-bombers, artillery, and helicopters to deliver mustard in an effort to dislodge Iranian forces around Mount Kordeman in the northern border area. The chemical attacks had little effect on Iranian troops; however, the Iraqi forces were exposed when the wind shifted toward Iraqi lines and the dense vapor flowed downhill—away from the Iranians.

14. The Intelligence Community believes that in some cases during specific battles Iraqi chemical employments have been tactically effective. Whenever the Iraqis used good delivery techniques, weather conditions and terrain were favorable, and the Iranians were not adequately prepared or trained, the use of chemical weapons has been effective. Iraqi mustard